NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-6314
EDIE SMITH APPLE/PARIS

DECEMBER 12, 1978

BELGIAN ELECTION APATHY
(VOICE FED 12/11/78 - AVAILABLE IN TAPE LIBRARY)

ANNCR:

BELGIUM WILL ELECT A NEW PARLIAMENT ON SUNDAY (12/17/78). V.O.A.'S EDIE SMITH APPLE RECENTLY VISITED BRUSSELS AND SENT THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

THE PARLIAMENT THE BELGIANS ELECT ON SUNDAY WILL HAVE THE POWER TO AMEND THE CONSTITUTION, MAKING IMPORTANT CHANGES IN HOW BELGIUM IS GOVERNED. IT WILL DECIDE HOW MUCH INDEPENDENCE CAN BE GIVEN TO THE COUNTRY'S VARIOUS REGIONS -- THE DUTCH-SPEAKING FLANDERS, FRENCH-SPEAKING WALLONIA, AS WELL AS THE PRIMARILY FRENCH-SPEAKING CAPITAL, BRUSSELS, AND A SMALL GERMAN AREA NEAR THE BORDER.

BUT FOR ALL THE IMPORTANCE TO THE NEW PARLIAMENT, THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN HAS BEEN VERY LOW KEY. THERE SEEM TO BE FEWER POSTERS THAN USUAL, AND ALL THAT THE ELECTIONS SEEM TO MEAN THE MANY VOTERS IS A MAILBOX FULL OF ELECTION BROCHURES TO THROW AWAY. IN A POLL TAKEN A FEW WEEKS AGO, NEARLY HALF THE BELGIANS QUESTIONED SAID THEY WOULD NOT VOTE AT ALL IF VOTING WERE NOT MANDATORY. ONE BELGIAN EXPLAINED THAT MOST VOTERS DO NOT SEE WHY THIS ELECTION IS TAKING PLACE AND THEY DON'T SEE WHAT DIFFERENCE IT WILL MAKE.

THE ELECTION COMES AS A RESULT OF THE RESIGNATION OF LEO TINDEMANS AS PRIME MINISTER IN OCTOBER. MISTER TINDEMANS IS THE LEADER OF THE LARGEST FACTION OF THE COUNTRY'S LARGEST PARTY--THE DUTCH-SPEAKING SOCIAL CHRISTIANS. THEY HELD FIFTY OF THE TWO HUNDRED TWLEVE SEATS IN THE LAST PARLIAMENT. MISTER TINDEMANS GOVERNED WITH A COALITION THAT INCLUDED THE SOCIALISTS, THE MOST

POWERFUL PARTY IN THE FRENCH-SPEAKING AREA, PLUS TWO SMALL LINGUISTIC PARTIES.

THIS GOVERNMENT WAS IN THE PROCESS OF PUTTING INTO LAW A COMPLICATED PLAN TO DIVIDE THE COUNTRY INTO REGIONS. BUT AN INCREASING NUMBER OF POLITICIANS WERE EXPRESSING DOUBTS ABOUT THE PLAN, PARTICULARLY SOME CONCESSIONS GRANTED TO SOME FRENCH-SPEAKERS AROUND BRUSSELS. PRIME MINISTER TINDEMANS RESIGNED RATHER THAN AGREE TO SUPPORT THE PLAN WITHOUT ANY CHANGES. AFTER THE RESIGNATION, AN INTERIM GOVERNMENT, LED BY THE DEFENSE MINISTER PAUL VANDEN BOEYNANTS, A FRENCH-SPEAKING SOCIAL CHRISTIAN FROM BRUSSELS, QUICKLY PUT THROUGH LEGISLATION NEEDED TO GIVE THE NEW PARLIAMENT THE POWER TO AMEND THE CONSTITUTION AND THEY CALLED THE ELECTIONS.

THE ONLY ISSUE THAT IS GETTING ANY ATTENTION IN THE SLOW MOVING CAMPAIGN IS REGIONALIZATION, AND THIS IS ONE EXPLANATION OF VOTER APATHY. THE FRENCH-SPEAKING PARTIES HAVE ISSUED A JOINT MANIFESTO SAYING THAT DESPITE DIFFERENCES ON OTHER ISSUES, THEY ALL STAND BEHIND THE PLAN WORKED OUT BY THE LAST GOVERNMENT. AND THE FLEMISH SEEM TO AGREE THAT PERHAPS THAT PLAN WENT A BIT TOO FAR. SINCE THE FRENCH-SPEAKERS ONLY CHOOSE AMONG THE FRENCH CANDIDATES, AND THE FLEMISH AMONG THE FLEMISH CANDIDATES, THE ELECTION IS UNLIKELY TO CHANGE DIVISIONS IN PARLIAMENT ON THIS MAIN ISSUE. NOR IS IT EXPECTED TO MAKE IT ANY EASIER TO FORM ANOTHER COALITION AND TO REACH A NEW COMPROMISE REGIONALIZATION PLAN.

PERHAPS, THE BEST HOPE FOR SOLUTION IS THAT EVERYONE IN BELGIUM -- FLEMISH OR FRENCH -- AGREES THAT SOME SOLUTION TO THE REGIONALIZATION PROBLEM MUST BE REACHED SOON. HE COUNTRY AND REGIONS NEED TO CONCENTRATE ON SOLVING THE MAJOR ECONOMIC AND

SOCIAL PROBLEMS, SUCH AS UNEMPLOYMENT, WHICH FACE BELGIUM AS THEY DO ALL ITS UNI-LINGUAL NEIGHBORS.

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